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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000636

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SUBJECT: HAMAS LEADERS IN SYRIA, SARG OFFICIALS EXPRESS
DIFFERENCES OVER POST-GAZA FALLOUT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

11. (C) Summary: SARG officials and the Damascus-based leaders of Hamas are offering divergent views in their assessments about the necessity and impact of the Hamas takeover in Gaza, with the SARG MFA officials expressing concern and Hamas leaders here -- after some initial uncertainty -- projecting confidence that it can manage the crisis. Some SARG leaders believe Hamas may have overreached, and they are seeking a "political umbrella," with the Saudis or the Egyptians, to help Hamas reconcile with Abu Mazen and Fatah. Abu Mazen envoy Abbas Zaki has visited Damascus twice in the past ten days, soliciting Syrian and Iranian views on the situation. Damascus-based Hamas leaders, most often repeated demand, according contacts who have met regularly with its leaders since the Gaza crisis erupted, is that Abu Mazen get rid of Gaza security chief Mohammed Dahlan. For now, Syria's somewhat limited ability to influence events in the territories, at least in the short term, with Israel not at center stage, seems to have SARG officials frustrated and concerned. End Summary.

12. (C) AGREEING TO DISAGREE: Syrian MFA officials and the Damascus-based Hamas leadership appear to disagree about the current situation in the wake of the Hamas takeover in Gaza, according to contacts who have met with the two sides. SARG officials seem troubled by the recent developments, worried that Hamas overreacted to events in Gaza and has lurched into a dangerous political situation. Dr. Samir al-Taki, an informal advisor to the MFA (and a protg of FM Mu'allim) told A/DCM that Hamas "made a huge mistake and they will pay for it." He saw few benefits for Hamas in the action, assessing that the group "took itself out of the game" and "overplayed their hand." Al-Taki also noted that Hamas had projected to the entire Arab world that Islamists "would never share power," but would insist on monopolizing it, a view extremely damaging for the political prospects of Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

13. (C) Palestinian-American academic Muhammed Muslih, who has met with a range of Syrian officials in Damascus over the past two weeks, offered a similar assessment of the SARG view. He described the Syrians (and the Iranians) as worried that Hamas had made a mistake that could devalue a prized asset. Syrian officials are now looking for a "political umbrella," a compromise formula that could be worked out between Abu Mazen (with Fatah) and Hamas and be endorsed by a third party (with credibility in the West that the Syrians lack) such as the Saudis or the Egyptians. Such an effort would take time, noted Muslih. FM Mu'allim June 25 publicly

laid stress on the importance of containing the deterioration in the territories and stopping the fighting among the "Palestinian brothers." Al-Hayat journalist Ibrahim Hamidi offered a different take, insisting that while FM Mu'allim and the MFA are concerned, some hard-liners in the SARG, led by VP Shara'a, remain confident that Hamas's powerful -- and rising -- influence in the territories, will allow it to emerge unscathed from the current crisis.

¶4. (C) According to Muslih, Abu Mazen has "not closed the door," despite his tough rhetoric in public. His envoy from Lebanon, Abbas Zaki (who represents PLO and Fatah in the Palestinian camps and is used by Abu Mazen to pass messages to the Syrians and others in the region), has been to Syria twice since the Hamas takeover, initially to talk to the Syrians, and more recently (June 23-24) to meet with Syrian and Iranian officials visiting Damascus. Zaki and an accompanying delegation met with Syrian VP Farouk Shara'a June 24 and twice with Iranian officials, including Assistant FM Mohammed Reza Baqri, "to see what they want," said Muslih. (Note: Baqri met with VP Shara'a and Mu'allim June 24.) Iranian officials for their part have been talking to all the Palestinian factions in Damascus as they, like the Syrians, grapple with the situation.

¶5. (C) ABU MAZEN WILL FAIL IN EFFORTS TO ISOLATE HAMAS: Hamas leaders here recognize they are confronting a crisis, but they are projecting confidence that they can manage it successfully and will not let Abu Mazen dictate conditions to them, according to Muslih, who has met on several occasions in the past ten days with senior Hamas leaders in Damascus, including Khalid Mishal. Especially in the first few days after the takeover in Gaza, and to a lesser degree more

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recently, Khalid Mishal and others in Hamas here privately expressed some reservations about what the Hamas military wing had done, according to Damascus-based diplomatic contacts who met with them. Pointing to the need for patience, Hamas leaders insist that in the intermediate and longer term, Abu Mazen will fail with his current effort because "the Israelis will give him nothing and the Americans will only offer money," reported Muslih, describing their views. That will leave Abu Mazen without any "political horizon," which will become increasingly evident in the coming months, and perhaps even in the wake of the June 25 Sharm meeting between Abu Mazen and the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, and Israel. For now, Hamas leaders here acknowledge that Abu Mazen has (literally) refused to return their phone calls, and they have stopped trying to make contact for the moment.

¶6. (C) Visiting Fatah official Hani al-Hassan, in Damascus June 15-17 to confer with the Syrians (he saw VP advisor and former security chief Mohammed Nassif Khairbek and was attempting to arrange a meeting with Mu'allim) endorsed the view that Abu Mazen (and Fatah) needed to seek a modus vivendi with Hamas. Speaking to A/DCM June 16, before Abu Mazen unveiled his hard-line public posture, al-Hassan saw the need for reprisals and confrontation to stop and for "politics to take over." He added bitterly that Gaza security chief (and Abu Mazen advisor) Mohammed Dahlan -- and the small group that surrounded him -- had "no support" in Fatah, which explained why Fatah security forces had not fought vigorously in Gaza (and why Abu Mazen needed to dump Dahlan).

¶7. (C) Hamas plans to be patient and will not attack Israel or try to trigger a conflict with Fatah in the West Bank, said Muslih. According to Muslih, however, Hamas leaders also warned that if violent reprisals in the West Bank continued and reached beyond a level Hamas felt could -- or should -- be absorbed, Hamas would defend itself in various ways, including targeting senior leaders in Abu Mazen's inner circle in Ramallah. Hamas leaders are also confident that their power and influence in the West Bank have been

seriously underrated (and Fatah's overrated), reported Muslih. This assessment of Hamas's West Bank strength (and of Fatah's underlying weakness there) was shared by former Palestinian security chief Ghazi Jabali, now resident in Damascus. He told A/DCM June 20 that the situation in Gaza, where Fatah-aligned security forces in essence had "refused to fight for Dahlan" would be replicated in the West Bank -- with weak leaders like Haj Ismail and Tawfik Tirawi -- if a confrontation developed with Hamas. Jabali assessed that Hamas has disguised and hidden its strength in the West Bank, using a sleeper cell and other strategies, to avoid confrontation with the Israeli military.

¶8. (C) HAMAS DEMANDS: According to Muslih, Hamas leaders also have a list of demands that mirror what Hamas characterizes as Abu Mazen's "extreme" list:

- Remove Mohammed Dahlan and his group from positions of influence (and put them "on trial;" according to Muslih Hamas has discovered extremely embarrassing information in the files they confiscated during the Gaza takeover, including evidence of sexual escapades and collaborating with Israel, which could presumably be used in such trials, or more likely, as political leverage);

- Return to the Mecca Agreement and the national unity government;

- Begin serious negotiations for re-structuring the PLO; and

- Rebuild the Palestinian security forces, while accepting control by independents acceptable to Abu Mazen (as long as they do not include Dahlan and his group, whom Hamas believes was collaborating with Israel).

¶9. (C) UNAVOIDABLE FIGHT OR A TRAP: Unlike SARG MFA officials, Hamas leaders here insist that the conflict in Gaza was forced upon them. According to this assessment, Hamas leaders in Gaza believed Mohammed Dahlan was planning to use security forces under his control to attack and dismantle Hamas' security forces and military wing. While Syrian officials share this extremely negative view of Dahlan, they question whether Hamas needed to take such

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drastic action. A recent al-Hayat piece by Damascus-based correspondent Hamidi, with good contacts in the MFA and the Syrian security services, described Syrian officials as worried that Hamas had "fallen into a trap" in Gaza.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Obviously Hamas leaders here are spinning furiously to portray the Gaza takeover as a manageable crisis. Syrian officials -- especially in the moderate camp led by Mu'allim -- seem more worried about developments at a critical time, with one of their most prized cards, which seemed to be steadily appreciating in value, having seen a sudden erosion in value. Syrian hard-liners, sharing Hamas' assessment, seem more confident that in the longer term, Hamas's residual strength in the territories, vis a vis Fatah, will prevail, leaving the value of Syria's card intact.

CORBIN